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Does understanding the scandal threaten or strengthen the student's faith?

By Paul Lakeland

At the Catholic Theological Society of America annual meeting in June of last year I chaired a session devoted to the topic, "The undergraduate classroom: what is the theologian doing?" It was a fine session in which the four speakers talked intelligently about the problem. But I am still wondering, after all these years, about the responsibility of the theologian to undergraduate education. Indeed, I was reminded very forcefully of the issues when one of my best students approached me after class in February of 2004. What did I think I was doing, putting students under stress by giving them issues to think about that stretched them far beyond what their actual background in the Catholic tradition had prepared them to handle? My student wasn't asking me to make it easy. The student wasn't whining. But he did articulate a challenge that has bothered me off and on: can a theologian be a theologian when what is needed is remedial catechesis? Are we over-qualified, or under-qualified?

Some approaches to answering these questions came to me because of my experience teaching a course in the spring semester of 2003 on "The Crisis in the Catholic Church." Surely here, if anywhere, was a topic tailor-made for turning mere cynics into full-blown agnostics. Take two groups of thirty traditional-age undergraduates and subject them to the whole sordid story of clerical sexual abuse of children and the ensuing crisis born of poor episcopal leadership. How could this possibly nurture their faith? Wouldn't an early baby-boomer child of Vatican II be unloading all kinds of answers to questions that these generation-whatevers hadn't even dreamed of? As I planned my syllabus, wasn't I fashioning all sorts of stumbling-blocks to the faith of young people? Couldn't I almost feel the millstone being hung around my neck?

There is an obvious sense in which teaching the crisis to undergraduates is no different from teaching anything else and simply follows the rules of good pedagogy. At the same time, teaching the crisis in the church presents its own set of problems, particularly with undergraduates. Top of the list must be the danger of undermining what may already be an insecure faith commitment. God knows, the crisis is a challenging moment for all of us. But for those who are at a stage in their lives when adolescent rebellion is still making its mark, who have a whole lot of other apparently more pressing things to think about, and who may just be looking for sufficient reason to walk away anyway, studying the crisis in the wrong way could do more harm than good. Second, it is all too easy to unbalance the students' sense of the church. Most of them will spend little enough time in the study of the Christian tradition, and if their only exposure to ecclesiology is a catalogue of episcopal malfeasance and the grubby little sins of some clergy, how and when do they encounter the mystery? Where do they find the People of God? Third, what do they do with what they have learned? It could all too easily be the case that teaching the crisis is fueling a level of indignation that cannot find an outlet within church polity as presently constructed. Indeed, lay frustration with the lack of avenues through which lay influence can be brought to bear on this and other serious issues is at the heart of the problem. Young people typically react more intensely, but they are even further away from opportunities to bring their influence to bear—they are far less likely than more mature adults, for example, to be giving significant sums to the church and therefore unable to withhold them—and constitutionally disinclined to put their time into the tedious war of attrition against bureaucracy in which the grizzled veterans of VOTF or *Call to Action* seem to have unlimited time to invest.

For a long time now I have approached the teaching of undergraduate religious studies and theology by entering if not their door, then at least one a little nearer to their end of

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the hall than make his way to class. In addition to religious Studies approaches the subject through autobiographies of people who represent not only different religious traditions but also contemporary ways of being related to these traditions—in the mode of disaffection, in a search for roots, uncomfortably ensconced in the gap between the gospel and the church, and so on. Most of my other courses pursue theological issues like grace, sin and redemption, suffering and so on, through literature rather than through the writings of theologians, even good ones. The purpose here is to promote the inductive method. Novels are not lives, but they illuminate the lives they tell, and some of that light transfers to the lives of the readers, so that religious issues arise from real-life situations and are examined out of need. When we start from the textbooks, like any deduction, there is always the danger of a theological Procrusteanism that trims the actual events of life to fit the categories that we are often only too ready to impose.

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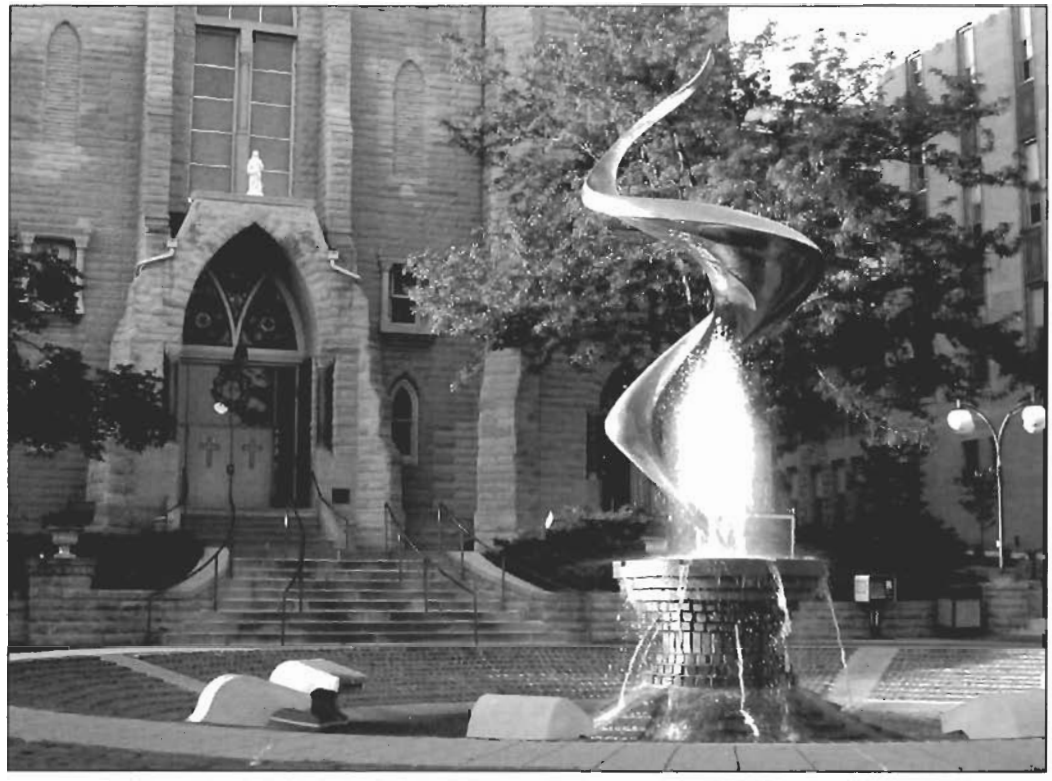
Teaching the crisis is another step in the same direction, an exercise in what I would call "inductive ecclesiology." Looked at this way, the problematic issues of teaching this topic don't exactly evaporate, but they are reconstituted differently. There is no way to begin but with a detailed account of the events that led to the crisis. Academic honesty requires it, and dealing with the deeper issues of the crisis doesn't make sense unless you have come to terms with the scale and sordidness of the problems. This material is no doubt that it is troubling to many students, as it should be. Deep acquaintance with the history brings many of them to the brink of abandoning whatever religious affiliation they have retained.

Things are not a whole lot better when you take the second step and look to varying interpretations of the crisis. Now the facts give way to underlying pathologies. Questions must be confronted about seminary training, about clericalism, about the processes for the selection of bishops, about relationships between Rome and the American church, about patterns of ministry and the restriction of ordination to celibate men. These are all hard questions in themselves, but particularly hard in this context because they force students to examine the church in a way most of them have not previously done. They have to confront the human reality of the church, when they would rather watch movies about somewhat improbable exorcisms. *Stigmata* is what they want to see, but they are being forced to watch a latter-day *True Confessions*, only to discover that it is really a documentary.

While a sociology department might not have to defend itself for offering such a course, theology or religious studies has a responsibility to go beyond the nitty-gritty details, even beyond the exploration of the pathological dimensions of the crisis. Here is a pedagogical principle for theology: no course can be legitimate if it leads students away from hopefulness towards either cynicism or despair. And here is a second: no course can do anything other than tell the truth. This is the fundamental dilemma of teaching the crisis. How can one be faithful to both pedagogical principles? The truth is undoubtedly disheartening and the story cannot be told without putting continuing religious affiliation in danger. But the only alternative is even more unpalatable: ignore the crisis and go on teaching that

Residence hall, Marquette University.



Water dances in the fountain in the early morning light on Creighton's campus. In the background is St. John's Church.

the church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic in blithe disregard of events that put these theological truths to work.

Teaching the crisis has been a rewarding activity for me, and I believe for the great majority of the students in the course, as an academic exercise. At this level, the crisis offers opportunities to learn valuable lessons in multiple ways. In the first place, it teaches what I believe is the fundamental lesson of the liberal arts, an openness to the truth through a willingness to let the story tell itself, in other words, the cultivation of the habit of empathy. Second, it is a wonderful case study of the perils of lack of moral accountability that can flourish in closed societies, whether church, academy or Washington, D.C.

Third, it insistently proclaims that compassion is complex. The crisis is not a simple black and white affair with heroes and villains clearly distinguished from one another. The victims are obviously victims, and the abusers are obviously villains. But what about the rest of us? Priests, bishops, laity, the Vatican, attorneys and the press, all are implicated to some degree in the crisis, and sorting out our feelings towards these different groups is a wonderful object lesson in the moral complexity of human life. Fourth, the crisis provides a superb example of the conflict of interpretations at work. The attention to detail that the course begins with, painful but necessary, prepares the students to see both the legitimacy of differing explanations of the crisis and the ways in which prejudices, presuppositions and ideologies can distort the judgment of well-informed commentators. And fifth and finally, it stimulates ecclesiological reflection as a real world exercise, with real people and their tragedies at stake.

If these are all valuable lessons to learn, they would not justify the course as a theology or religious studies course if one could not also deal with the charge that the exercise might be dangerous to the faith of the undergraduate audience. As a matter of fact, while that is an understandable concern, it is not in the end a real issue. Quite the contrary. Studying the crisis teaches something about how faith is possessed, helps to distinguish between faith and its counterfeit forms, and so in the end may put what faith the students have on a somewhat surer footing.

Far too many students still live with the childhood understanding of faith as an assent to a lengthy list of sometimes dubious propositions. It is a well-attested fact that our students operate with a cafeteria-style approach to what the church teaches, and it seems to me that there is a clear correlation between propositional approaches to faith and the great buffet table of the hierarchy of truths. I would go further than this. I would suggest that the selectivity that younger Catholics demonstrate towards the teachings of the church, a choosiness not essentially different from that of older Catholics but maintained much more insouciantly, is an inchoate critique of propositional approaches to faith. The challenge to theology for undergraduates is to lead them beyond the protest to a different understanding of faith as commitment.

No course can do everything, but teaching the crisis brings some important religious truths into focus. Above all, it teaches a lesson about how Catholics should maintain their faith and inhabit their church, namely, as adults. This is the one glaringly universal message of the crisis. Beyond arguments about celibacy and seminary formation, we can probably agree that abusers show arrested sexual development, that bishops have too often shown themselves as so many ostriches with their heads in the sand,

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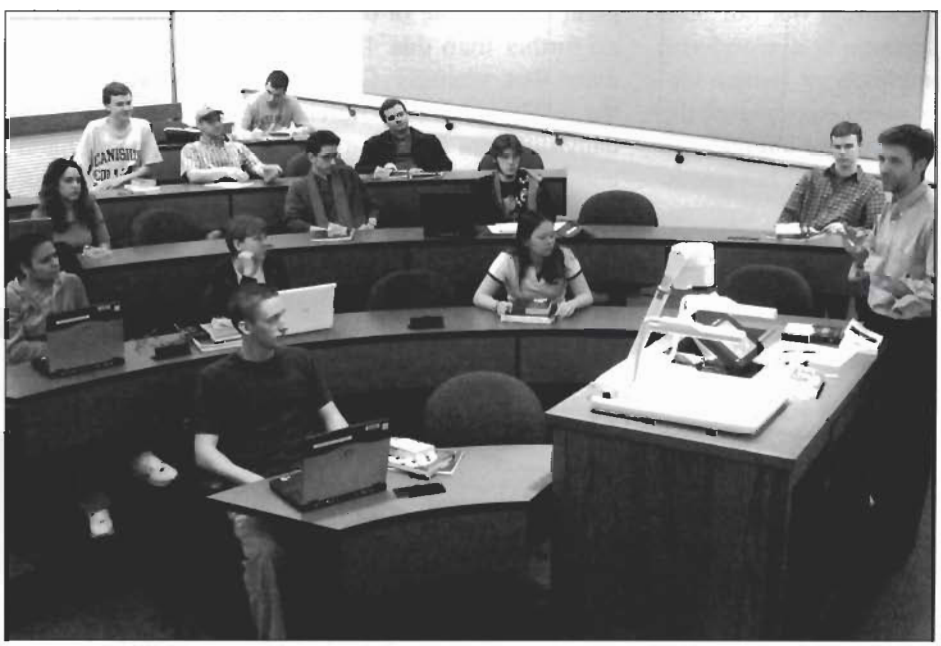
engaged in childish refusal to face facts, and that priests and laypeople in their own ways have preferred the easy paths of an idealized vision to the harsh realities of a sinful church. Aristophanes called it "cloud-cuckoo land," and we have to realize that grown-ups don't live there. The crisis has awakened Catholics to the need to be adult, to accept the challenge of accountability. Adults live accountable lives, whether to their dependents, their families and partners, to the people they serve, or to their own consciences. Students in their late teens and early twenties most commonly stand between their first and second naiveté. The crisis teaches them that these two naivetés are different. A childlike dwelling within the myth has to give way to the hopeful possession of a vision to be believed in only to the degree that we are ready to work for it.

Finally, then, we come to teaching the crisis as an example of the theologian's craft. The moral responsibility of the theologian as educator is to model a faithful critique of ecclesial reality in the service of an adult and accountable church. Students forgive their teachers a lot. Mine have, at least! But they put a high premium upon the enthusiasm of the instructor, since they rightly see it as a leading indicator of integrity. More than what is taught about the crisis, beyond the lessons learned through the hard study of an unrelentingly unpleasant reality, the teacher models adult faith. It must be realistic, clear-eyed and clear-headed, responsible, compassionate and loving. Loving of the church in all its moral ambiguity, loving of the students in their consternation and struggle with the church as it really is, and loving of the truth.

Yes, there is a remedial component to the undergraduate theology classroom. But it is not a matter so much of plugging gaps in knowledge as it is of drawing the students beyond an immature grasp of religious reality—one that far too many adults carry through life—to realistic hope in the grace of God. Nor are the students the only ones who need remedial work. We all know that we can be humbled at times by the moral sensitivity of our students or the acquaintance that some of them have with experiences of suffering that go beyond our own. To see them struggling with the harsh realities of a dysfunctional church that is still the standard-bearer of gospel truth helped to make at least this theologian just a little less jaded.



Old Main Classroom, Canisius College.